

63 *The First Storm Over Russia*

Borovenka, 212 versts from St. Petersburg, Chorino school, ask for the teacher."

We left the train at Borovenka. A long platform, a few railroad buildings along it, a road flanked by snowdrifts around the station, rolling fields buried under snow and crisscrossed by delicately etched fences. No village in sight. The stationmaster with the traditional red cap, the watchman, and the gendarme who had met the train disappeared as soon as it pulled out. As we looked around, we saw a small country sleigh in front of the station. The driver came toward us, a little man in a yellow sheepskin coat and felt boots, his face hidden behind the icicles hanging from his fur hat and bushy eyebrows.

"I guess you are strangers here?" he asked us. "Maybe from afar? Say, from St. Petersburg?" And before we could answer, he continued, "If you are looking for the Chorino school, you must be the people for whom I am waiting. Lazar is my name."

Lazar helped us into the sleigh, covered us with fresh hay, took the coachman's seat, and continued to talk. "Last night, Thomas, our teacher, told me that people from St. Petersburg were coming. They do not know our place, he said, so will you bring them here from the station? And I said, they must be fine people to travel all the distance from St. Petersburg to our village. And so I froze here all night waiting for you." He laughed happily.

The road ran downhill. Three score small log houses flanked it deep in the valley, forming a tiny hamlet. "Borovenka," Lazar explained. "Funny people, those living here. To look at them, they are muzhiks, but they like long rubles from the railroad better than their fields."

The road began to rise, winding between hills covered with snow, with patches of woodland here and there and clusters of log cabins so small and so neatly traced against the snow that they seemed unreal. The horse was all silver under its red shaft bow; the sleigh floated like a boat in an ocean of blue and white. Not a soul was about except Lazar and the two of us. Lying on fragrant hay, we listened to our driver. Now he was telling us about the teacher: a learned man but not proud, always siding with simple people. On his advice the community had subscribed to a newspaper, a good one, that also sided with the poor.

Chorino was considerably larger than Borovenka. It had a modest church, in front of which was the school building, as large as two peasant izbas put together. The teacher's house, across the street, was almost as large.

The teacher met us on the porch—a young man, powerfully built, with a broad smile on his ruddy face. His house consisted of a large